

The Blue Lantern

and Other Stories

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here even children in American caps talk in foreign slang. I heard a sharp squealing of brakes behind me, and a woman screamed. Even as I searched with my eyes for Nika, I knew what had happened. The car – it was a flashy Lada with bright stickers on the rear windscreen – picked up speed again. Evidently the driver was frightened, even though it was not his fault. When I ran over, the car was already out of sight round a bend. Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed the dog running back to its master. Suddenly several people appeared out of nowhere, gazing in avid fascination at the unnaturally bright blood on the wet asphalt.

“What a swine,” I heard a voice with a Georgian accent say behind me. “He just drove on.”

“People like that should be shot,” said another voice, a woman’s. “They’ve bought up everything, they have... What are you looking at me like that for? I can see you’re one of them too...”

The crowd behind me kept growing. Several other voices joined in the conversation, but I wasn’t listening any more. It had started to rain again, and bubbles were drifting across the puddles, drifting like our thoughts and hopes, like our lives. The wind from the woods brought the first smells of summer, filled with an inexpressible freshness which seemed to promise something that had never yet existed. I felt no grief and I was terribly calm, but as I looked at her lifeless, stark form stretched out across the asphalt, at her body which even after death had retained its mysterious Siamese beauty, I knew that no matter how my life might change, no matter what my tomorrows might bring, no matter what might replace the things I loved and the things I hated, I would never stand at my window holding any other cat.

Mid-Game

The stretch of pavement along the side of the Hotel National, for the last thirty feet of Gorky-Tverskaya Street, was fenced off by wooden posts strung with small crumpled red pennants, fluttering in the cold January wind. Anyone who wanted to go down into the pedestrian crossing had to step off the pavement and walk along the line of parked cars, reading the brightly coloured foreign-language insults stuck to the inside of their windcreens. Lusya found one slogan on a huge streamlined bus particularly offensive – “We Show You Europe”. “We” was obviously the firm that owned the bus, but who was “you”? Somehow she suspected “you” wasn’t some foreigner wanting a trip abroad, but Lusya herself, and the snow-plastered bus itself was Europe – so very close and at the same time quite inaccessible. A policeman stuck his beaming red face out from behind Europe: he grinned in a manner so precisely in tone with Lusya’s thoughts that her instant response was to turn on her heels and go back the way she had come.

Climbing the steps to the open platform in front of the Intourist, she went over to the stall that sold coffee. Usually it would have taken at least five minutes to get to the front of the jostling queue, but today was frosty so there was no one around. Even the plexiglass window was closed. Lusya knocked. The girl who’d been dozing beside the grill stepped up to the counter and glanced with familiar hatred at Lusya’s

fox-fur coat ("fifteen skins" as her friends called it), the fox-fur hat and the face with its faint traces of expensive make-up that was looking in at her from the dark, snowy world.

"Coffee, please," said Lusya.

The girl shoved two small metal coffee-pots into the layer of sand on the stove, took the money and asked:

"Isn't it cold out there, working the street all evening?"

"What a bitch," thought Lusya, but she didn't answer; she just took her coffee and went over to one of the tables.

Not a very good day. In fact, it had been a very bad day, no one but drunken Finns cavorting about outside the National, and they looked as though they were fishermen. The one brief prospect had been a skinny white-haired Frenchman with rakish ogling eyes, but after making a couple of passes by Lusya, he never actually said anything, just dropped his empty pack of Gitanes by the rubbish-bin, stuck his hands into the pockets of his sheepskin coat and disappeared round the corner. Frost. It was so cold that even the drivers who dealt in cigarettes, condoms and beer had moved their free economic zone off the street into the narrow lobby of the National, where they were exchanging good-natured abuse with the jolly doorman:

"You used to be big in the KGB, and now you're shit just like everyone else... Or maybe you've bought up the entire hall. We've got human rights just like everyone else..."

Lusya went in, bought a packet of Salems from some middle-aged guy with a corroded nose and went back out into the frost. The foreign clientele were all dozing in their rooms or gazing out of their windows at the blinking coloured lights of the frozen city, apparently without a thought to spare for Lusya's tender young body.

"Maybe I should go over to the Moskva?" Lusya wondered, looking disdainfully over at the grey imperial facade decorated with ten-foot-high blue snowflakes on huge white banners. The fabric rippled in the wind, making the snow-flakes look like huge blue lice creeping across the cold wall. "But it's dead over there too," she thought.

The entrance to the Hotel Moskva was certainly depress-

ing. The howling wind and snow seemed to threaten that at any moment a group of young men with simple open faces would emerge from behind the columns, wearing army great-coats and leading Alsatians on broad leashes. Inside, in the broad marble entrance hall, a crowd of Asian drunks was singing some ancient battle hymn, while a different kind of music – bleating restaurant music – was blaring out on the third floor: "Whoah-oah, you're in the army now..."

Lusya left her fur coat and hat in the cloakroom, straightened her feather-light sweater with the silver spangles and went up to the second floor. This might not be a hot spot, but last autumn Lusya had pulled a German here for three hundred marks and two "Poison" perfume atomizers. He'd been perfect, some kind of aging commercial traveller with a wedding ring mark running round his hairy third finger, a fat little man who had already wound up his business with the Soviet authorities and was on the look-out for a moderately sweet and vaguely dangerous adventure in this wild northern land. A client like that won't hang about on the steps of the Intourist, he goes to some darker corner, like the Moskya, or even the Minsk, because he's afraid of having to pay too much. He's sure not to be infectious, and his demands will be touchingly simple. But he's a rarity, and above all, he's unpredictable. It's like angling.

Lusya ordered herself two cocktails, sat at the corner table in the bar, clicked her lighter and puffed the smoke up towards the ceiling. The place was almost empty. Two navy officers in black uniforms were sitting at the table opposite, both bald, with faces as long as the grave. A yellow cocktail stood untouched in its glass in front of each of them, and a bottle of vodka stood on the floor under the table – they were drinking through a long plastic tube, passing it back and forth with calm, precise movements, no doubt just the same way they pressed the buttons and threw the switches on the control panel of their nuclear submarine.

"I'll drink this and then go home," thought Lusya.

The cassette player started up, drowning out the music from the third floor, and Lusya felt a slight shudder run

down her spine. It was one of Abba's old songs, that one about a trumpeter, the moon, and so on. Back in '84 – or was it '85? – they'd played it all summer long on the old reel-to-reel "Mayak" in the office of the students' construction brigade. Where had it been? Astrakhan? Or Saratov? My God, thought Lusya, with a strange feeling, look where life's dumped me now. If anybody had told me back then, I'd have smacked his face. And it had all just happened, all by itself. Or had it?

"Plea-ea-ease may I invite you?"

Lusya raised her head. One of the navy officers in black was standing in front of her, staring expressionlessly into her face, his long extended arms swaying ever so slightly.

"Where to?" Lusya asked in surprise.

"To dance. Dance is a rhythm. Rhythm brings freedom."

Lusya was about to open her mouth to reply when she surprised herself by nodding and getting to her feet.

The black arms came together behind her back like a lock closing a suitcase and the officer began moving around between the tables, taking small steps, drawing Lusya after him, and trying to press his black uniform jacket close up against her – it wasn't even a proper uniform jacket, more like a schoolboy's jacket, only larger and with epaulettes. The officer moved completely out of time with the music – he obviously had his own little orchestra somewhere inside him, playing music that was slow and heart-rending. There was a smell of vodka from his mouth, not a sour, stale smell, but cold, pure and chemical.

"Why are you so bald?" Lusya asked, manœuvring the officer away a little bit. "You're still young."

"Seven years in a coffin of stee-eel," the officer sang quietly, raising his voice almost to a falsetto on the final word.

"Are you joking?" Lusya asked.

"In a co-offin," the officer crooned, now pressing against her quite openly.

"You were talking about freedom. Have you really got any idea what freedom is?" Lusya asked, pushing him away. "Have you?"

The officer muttered something unintelligible.

The music came to an end and Lusya unceremoniously detached his arms, went back to her table and sat down. The cocktail tasted disgusting. Lusya pushed it away and just for the sake of something to do she opened the handbag on her knees. Leafing through the pages of the copy of *The Young Guard* that lay between her powder box and her toothbrush (she hid her foreign currency in the magazine because she knew no one would ever bother to open it), she began counting the green five-dollar bills by touch, summoning up in her mind's eye the noble visage of Lincoln and the inscription "legal tender", which she translated into Russian as "legitimate affection". There were only eight bills left, and Lusya decided with a sigh that she'd better try her luck on the third floor, so she wouldn't suffer any pangs of conscience later.

The way upstairs was barred by a thick velvet rope, and a crowd of locals was milling about in front of it, hoping to get into the restaurant. Sitting on a stool in the narrow passage which remained was the head waiter, dressed in a blue uniform with yellow trimmings. Lusya nodded to him and, stepping over the rope, went up to the restaurant and turned into the tiled cubby-hole just before the snackbar. There she found a waiter she knew called Seryozha, pouring leftover champagne out of a large number of glasses through a plastic funnel into an empty bottle that was already wrapped in a napkin and standing in an ice-bucket.

"Hi, Seryozha," said Lusya, "how's the scene today?"

Seryozha smiled and waved to her. He felt the same disinterested respect and affection for Lusya as a distinguished lathe-operator no doubt feels on Saturday evenings for an acquaintance who is an ace on the milling machine.

"Rubbish, Lusya. Two lousy Poles and a Kampuchean. Come in on Friday. The Arab oil sheikhs'll be here. I'll sit you next to the sweatiest of the lot."

"I'm afraid of all those Asians," sighed Lusya. "I pulled an Arab once, Seryozha, and you wouldn't believe what it was like. He carried this steel sabre around in his suitcase, it folds up like, like a..." Lusya demonstrated with her hands.

"A belt," Sergei suggested.

"No, not a belt, it's... like a folding ruler. He couldn't get it up without that sabre. Didn't let go of it all night long, even sliced a pillow in half. In the morning I was covered in fluff. Good job they have bathrooms *en suite*..."

Seryozha laughed, picked up the tray with the champagne bucket and dashed off into the dining-hall. Lusya lingered for a moment by the marble railing to take a look at the decorated ceiling – the centre was occupied by a huge fresco, which Lusya vaguely suspected showed the creation of the world in which she'd been born and grown up, and which had somehow totally disappeared during the last few years. At the very centre ceremonial fireworks blossomed into vast bouquets, and at the corners Titans stood on guard, either skiers in track suits or students with notebooks tucked under their armpits; Lusya had never taken a close look at them because her attention was entirely absorbed by the bright trails and stars of the fireworks, painted in colours long forgotten, the same colours with which the morning sometimes paints the walls of the old Kremlin: lilacs, pinks and pale purples that roused memories of objects that had evaporated with the mists of time past – caramel tins, tooth powder and ancient calendars that a forgotten grandmother had left behind with her bundle of share certificates.

The sight of this fresco always made Lusya feel sad. The place often induced thoughts of the impermanence of existence, and then she remembered her friend Natasha who had found an elderly trade representative to marry her and had almost had her bags packed when suddenly, instead of warm, well-fed Zimbabwe, she wound up in a chilly Soviet cemetery. Nobody had any idea who had killed her, but it must have been some kind of maniac, because they found a white chess piece in her mouth – a pawn.

Lusya imagined a snow-drift crusted over with ice, and inside it her corpse, her mouth wedged open with a white pawn, and suddenly she felt afraid to stay in this immense, dirty building with its drunken roaring voices and its clattering dishes.

She walked quickly out of the hall and down the stairs to the cloakroom. Something must have shown in her face, for the head waiter glanced at her and immediately turned his astonished gaze away. "Calm down, you fool," Lusya told herself, "how are you going to work with thoughts like that in your head? No one's going to kill you." The music from the restaurant was even clearer downstairs than on the third floor, but quieter; the singer howled "who-ah, who-ah" yet again, then the door slammed shut and the wind took up the same song.

A girl was standing by the entrance, wearing a black leather jump-suit and a green woolly cap. From the copy of *The Young Guard* protruding from her pocket, Lusya realised that she was a colleague. She could have guessed even without the hint of the journal.

"Got a cigarette?" the girl asked.

Lusya gave her one and the girl lit up.

"Any action in there?" she asked.

"Nothing doing," Lusya answered, "drunken sailors and Sovs. Maybe I'll try the Intourist."

"I was just there," the girl said. "There's a raid on, they've picked up Anya again. Her Cuban general gave her some cocaine and the stupid cow felt so good she decided to tip a waiter twenty dollars, only it turned out the waiter had ideology – he got shell-shocked in El Salvador. He said: 'If I got my hands on you in the jungle, first I'd give you to the boys to play around with and then I'd stick your stupid bare ass in a termite-hill. I spilt my blood, he said, and you're a disgrace to the country I spilt it for.'"

"It's easy enough to see who's the real disgrace to this country. What's bringing them all out of the woodwork? Have the talks in Vienna run into problems again?"

"The talks have nothing to do with it," said the girl. "It's something new going on. Did you hear about Natasha?"

"Which Natasha? The one who got killed, you mean?" Lusya tried to make the question sound casual.

"Right. The one they dumped in a snow-drift with a pawn in her mouth."

"I heard. What about it?"

"Well, the day before yesterday they found Tanya Polikarpova by the Cosmos hotel, with a rook."

"Tanya's been taken out?" Lusya felt herself turn cold. "Is it state security? Or the mafia?"

"Don't know, don't know," the girl answered thoughtfully. "But it doesn't look like it. They didn't take her dollars, or her groceries either. Just stuck this rook in her mouth. Anyway, no point in talking about it now, with the night still ahead..."

Lusya reached nervously for a cigarette.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Nelly," the girl replied, "and you're Lusya, I know. Anya was talking about you today."

Lusya looked at her companion more closely. Those dimples on the cheeks, that slightly turned-up nose, the black mascara – it seemed to Lusya that she'd seen the face before somewhere, seen it many times.

"Where have I met her before?" Lusya wondered, thinking hard. "Maybe KGB?"

"I mostly work the Cosmos," said Nelly, as though reading Lusya's thoughts, "but a week ago they changed all the doormen. You could be an old hag before you get friendly with the new ones. Yesterday they wouldn't let this French guy in because he'd left his hotel card in his room. He kept yelling at them to look in the register, but he might as well have been talking to the wall..."

Lusya thought she remembered now. "I've seen you in the National," she said uncertainly, "you've got a great dress."

"Which one?"

"Brown and black."

"Ah," Nelly smiled. "Yves Saint Laurent."

"Oh, come off it!"

Nelly shrugged her shoulders. There was an awkward pause, and then a young man who'd been prowling round them came a step closer and spoke in a fricative voice with a Ukrainian accent, but enunciating very clearly: "Hey there, broads, you got any greenstuff you want to shift?"

Lusya glanced derisively at his rabbit-skin hat and cheap leather jacket, and only then at his ruddy face with the small reddish moustache and the watery eyes.

"Hey, bumpkin," she said, "who's been shipping you all into Moscow? D'you know what we call greenstuff here?"

"What?" the young man asked, blushing through his ruddy complexion.

"Dollars. And we ain't broads, we're girls. Tell your captain his shitty dictionary's ten years out of date."

The young man was about to reply when Nelly interrupted him: "Don't take offence, Vasya. Once upon a time we were all just like you. Here's five dollars, go buy yourself a coffee in the bar."

"You shouldn't have insulted him like that," Nelly said, when the young man had disappeared behind one of the square columns. "That's Vasya, the doorman from Vnesheconombank. They send him over every week to find out the exchange rate."

"Okay," said Lusya. "Anyway I'm hitting the road. See you around."

"Why don't we go for a drink?"

Lusya shook her head and smiled.

"Na-ah," she said, "see you around."

By the time she had walked as far as the Manege hall with her arm held out for a taxi, Lusya was seriously cold. Her face and her hands were icy, and as always the freezing weather made her breasts ache. She caught herself wincing with the pain, remembered the wrinkle that was just beginning to trace itself on her forehead and made an effort to relax her face. A few seconds later the pain passed.

The taxis hurtled by, their small green lamps winking derisively. The drivers mostly dealt in vodka, and only occasionally if the mood was on them would they pick up passengers they liked the look of. Lusya didn't even raise her arm any more for the yellow Volgas coming towards her, she was waiting for a private car to stop.

She couldn't get the conversation on the steps of the

Moskva out of her head. "Tanya's been taken out," she kept repeating senselessly to herself. The meaning of the phrase didn't really penetrate her consciousness. It was getting extremely cold, and her breasts began to hurt again. She could still get to the underground in time, but then she'd have to wander along an ice-covered major road named after some prehistoric monster, alone, in her expensive fur-coat, shuddering at the wind's drunken laughter in the huge concrete archways. She'd already made up her mind that that was the way her evening would end, when a small green bus with a double-letter military number pulled up beside her.

The officer at the wheel was her dance-partner from the restaurant, but now he was wearing a black greatcoat and a cap with a big tin-plate crest, tilted to one side of his head.

"Get in," said the other bald, black figure in the back of the bus. "Don't bugger about."

Lusya glanced into the dim back of the bus and was astonished to see Nelly lounging in a relaxed pose on the long side-seat, beside the sailor.

"Lusya!" Nelly shouted happily. "Climb in. The sailor-boys are cool. They're going to drop me at my place, then where do you want to go?"

"Krylatskoe," said Lusya.

"Krylatskoe too? That means we're neighbours. Get in..."

For the second time that day Lusya acted strangely. Instead of telling them all to get lost the way any self-respecting hard-currency girl would, she stooped over and climbed up the steps. The bus immediately shot away, swerved deftly and went hurtling past the Bolshoi Theatre, the "Children's World" toy shop, the monument to the great artist Dzerzhinsky and his huge workshop, and off into the park, howling sidestreets with their half-ruined wooden fences and empty, black, bottomless windows.

"I'm Vadim. And this," said the second bald sailor, nodding at the man behind the wheel, "is Valera."

"Valer-r-ra," the driver repeated, as though listening to an unfamiliar word.

"Like some vodka?" Vadim asked.

"Okay," said Lusya, "but only through the tube."

"Through what tube?" Nelly asked.

"That's the way they drink it, through a tube," said Lusya, taking the thin, soft end of the tube and holding it to her lips.

It was a difficult and unpleasant way to drink vodka, but even so it was more amusing than swigging from the bottle.

"What a jolly life you do have, girls," Vadim whispered, "and we..."

"Yeah, can't complain," Nelly said, "but I'll take mine in a glass, if that's all right."

"We can fix that."

Lusya suddenly noticed that there was music in the bus too, coming from a cassette player on the engine cover beside Valera. It was the Bad Boys Blue. Lusya liked it – not the music itself, of course, but its effect. Gradually her surroundings felt more relaxed and even natural – the dark interior of the bus with the two gleaming maritime skulls, Nelly swinging her leg in time to the melody, the houses flashing past the window, the cars and the people. The vodka began to take effect and the mixture of indefinable sadness and distinct fear that Lusya had carried with her when she left the Moskva evaporated. An ordinary girlish fantasy filled her heart and mind, a dream, chaste in its very hopelessness, of a sun-tanned, kind-hearted American, and suddenly she wanted so much to believe the foreign singer when he said we would have no regrets and we would fly away from here in a time machine, although we've been sitting here being jolted about for so long now on this train to nowhere...

"Train to nowhere... Train to nowhere..."

The cassette ended.

The bus came out on to a wide road flanked by ice-shrouded trees and fell in close behind a truck with the word PEOPLE painted in yellow on its tail-gate. There was some iron object rattling about in the back of the truck, and the clanging seemed to rouse Lusya from her doze.

"Where the hell are we going?" she asked abruptly, fright-

ened because the scenes flashing by outside were unfamiliar, and not even much like Moscow.

"Ne-e-ver mind that," said Valera loudly, and both of the girls shuddered.

"It's okay, we've just got to fill the tank," Vadim put in rapidly. "We haven't got enough petrol to get to Krylatskoe."

"Do we have to go far?" Lusya asked.

"No, no, there's a garage not far from here that takes the coupons..."

The word "coupons" finally laid Lusya's fears to rest.

"We serve in the fleet, girls," said Vadim. "In the atomic submarine *Tambov*. It's just like a great big underwater armoured train with a crew that's one big family. Yeah... Seven years we've been there."

He took off his cap and ran his hand over the dully gleaming curve of his skull. The bus swerved off into a narrow side-street with concrete bunkers along its sides. It looked as though they were already out of the city and in the countryside. From up in the sky the stars ogled them with a cold debauched gleam like the eyes of that day's Frenchman, and the roar of the motor suddenly became strangely quiet, or perhaps it was just that the sound of trucks which had been moving along with them had disappeared.

"The ocean," said Vadim, putting his arm round Nelly's shoulders, "is vast. Wherever you look, an endless grey expanse reaches out on every side as far as the eye can see, and up above the distant starry dome of heaven with clouds drifting by... This thick layer of water... The immense space of the underwater heavens, bright-green at first, then dark-blue, and it goes on and on for thousands of miles. Huge whales, voracious sharks, mysterious creatures of the depths... And just imagine it, hanging there at the centre of this pitiless universe is the fragile shell of our submarine, so very, very tiny, if you just stop to think about it... the yellow gleam of a porthole, and behind it there's a meeting going on, and Valera's giving the report. And all around - just think of it! - the great, ancient ocean..."

"We're here," said Valera.

Lusya raised her head and looked around. The bus was standing on flat snow-covered ground about forty yards from a deserted main road. The engine died, and it became very quiet. Outside the windows the stars were twinkling menacingly and there was a forest in the distance. Lusya suddenly felt surprised at how bright it was, although there wasn't a single streetlamp, and then she thought that the snow was reflecting the scattered starlight. The vodka was making her feel comfortable and safe, and the fleeting suspicion that something was wrong rapidly evaporated.

"What d'you mean we're here? Are you joking or what?" Nelly asked roughly.

Vadim took his arm from her shoulders and sat there with his face buried in his hands, giggling quietly. Valera slipped out of the driver's side and a moment later the side door of the bus opened with a whoosh of air. Cloud of steam rushed out into the frosty exterior. Valera mounted the steps slowly and solemnly. In the semi-darkness the expression on his face was invisible, but he was holding a "Makarov" pistol, and under his arm he had a large, battered chessboard. Without turning around, he shoved the door shut with his left hand and its rubber seal squeaked from the frost. He waved to Vadim with his pistol.

Lusya slipped down off the seat, sobering up with terrifying speed, and made her way to the back of the bus. Nelly also started backing away, then she slipped on something and almost fell on Lusya, but managed to keep her feet.

Valera stood on the front platform, gripping the pistol trained on the girls as though supporting himself on a handrail. Vadim stood beside him, took out a pistol with one hand, took the chessboard from Valera with the other, and shook the chess-pieces out on to the engine cover. Then he froze, as though he'd forgotten what to do next. Valera stood there without moving either, and a green lamp on the dashboard flashed insistently between the two black cardboard silhouettes, informing the intelligence that created it that everything was in order in the bus's complex mechanism.

"Come on, boys," Nelly said in a low, gentle voice, "we'll

do anything you like, just put the chess set away..."

"Chess!" Lusya repeated to herself, and she finally realised what was happening.

Nelly's words seemed to bring the sailors to life.

"That's it," Valera said, and slipped off the catch on his pistol. Vadim glanced at him and did the same.

"Get on with it," said Valera, and Vadim turned away, put down his Makarov on the engine cover and hunched over a package lying beside the heap of chess-men. Lusya couldn't work out what he was doing: Vadim kept striking matches, gazing at a piece of paper and bending back down to the brown vinyl engine cover, where ordinary drivers keep their book of petrol coupons and tin of small change. Valera stood stock-still, and Lusya suddenly had the idea that his outstretched hand was very tired.

Vadim finally finished his preparations and stepped to the side. Four lighted candles arranged in a square transformed the engine cover into a strange altar. At the centre of the square the open chessboard glinted in the light, its black and white armies already deeply engaged. Terror had heightened Lusya's feelings to an extreme pitch, and despite her lifelong indifference to the game of chess, she suddenly felt the full drama of the clash between the two absolutely irreconcilable principles represented by the crude wooden figures on the chequered field.

On the home side of the black pieces stood a small metallic figurine: a thin man wearing a jacket, with his cheeks sucked in and a strand of steel hair falling across his forehead – Lusya recognised Karpov's expressionless face. He was about eight inches tall, but somehow he seemed huge, and the flickering candle flames made him seem alive, as if he was making repeated, meaningless small movements.

"The bowl," said Valera, and Vadim took a small enamelled bowl out from somewhere in the cab. He set it on the floor, then straightened up. Once again they both froze.

"Don't do it, boys," Lusya heard herself say in a strange-sounding voice, and realised she'd made a mistake when the two black figures began moving again.

"You," said Valera, pointing at Nelly.

Nelly pointed her thumb at herself as though asking a question, and the two men in black nodded simultaneously. Nelly walked towards them, clutching the strap of her French handbag in her fist and swinging it to and fro pitifully. When she reached the middle of the bus she stopped and glanced at Lusya. Lusya smiled encouragingly, feeling the tears spring to her eyes.

"You," Valera repeated.

Nelly walked on, and stopped when she reached the two figures in black.

"Now, girl," Vadim said in an official tone, "please make a move for white."

"What move?" Nelly asked. She seemed calm and indifferent.

"You decide."

Nelly looked at the board and moved one of the pieces.

"Now kneel down please," Vadim said in the same tone.

Nelly glanced at Lusya again, crossed herself in the wrong direction and slowly sank to her knees, tucking the hem of her skirt to the side. Valera put his pistol away and drew a long awl out of his pocket.

"Lean over the bowl," said Vadim.

"The bow-owl," said Valera.

Nelly drew her head into her shoulders.

"I repeat, lean over the bowl."

Lusya pressed her eyes closed.

"We're here," Valera said suddenly.

Lusya opened her eyes.

"We're here," Valera repeated, lowering the hand holding the awl, "that's not the way a knight moves."

"But that doesn't matter," Vadim said reassuringly, taking Valera by the arm, "it doesn't matter at all..."

"But it does! Do you want him to lose again? Do you? Have they bought you too?" Valera squealed.

"Calm down," said Vadim, "please. Do you want her to move again?"

"He'll lose again," said Valera, "and it'll be because of

you again, you stupid bitch.”

“Now, my girl,” Vadim said in a tense voice, “get up and make a proper move.”

Nelly got up off her knees, looked at Valera and saw the awl trembling in his hand. After that everything happened very quickly – Nelly must have finally realised that this was all real. She grabbed up the metal figurine and brought its cubic pedestal down with a scream on Valera’s black cap; Valera slumped into the pit of the steps down to the front door as though it had all been arranged beforehand.

Lusya covered her ears with her hands, expecting Vadim to start firing his pistol, but he squatted down on his haunches instead and put his hands over his head. Nelly swung the metal figurine once again and Vadim howled in pain – the blow had caught him on the fingers – but he didn’t change his position. Nelly hit him again but he went on sitting there, without moving, except to cover his damaged hand with the fingers of his other one, and muttering: “Oh, you bitch!”

Nelly was about to swing at him a third time, when suddenly she noticed the pistol that Vadim had left beside the chessboard. She flung the metal figurine to the floor, grabbed the pistol and pointed it at Valera, who was hidden from Lusya by a metal partition.

“Drop your gun,” she said in a hoarse voice. “Now!”

A sound of fumbling movements came from behind the partition, and then the pistol came flying out – Valera threw it almost up to the ceiling – and landed on the floor. Nelly quickly picked it up and said:

“Now come on out of there! Hands up!”

Two arms in black sleeves appeared above the partition, followed by a bald head and a pair of attentive eyes. Nelly began slowly backing away down the bus to where Lusya stood frozen in fright. Vadim was still squatting on his haunches, pressing his cap to his head as though a gale-force wind were blowing. Valera glanced at the girls, got down on all fours and began gathering up the chess-pieces scattered across the floor. He began singing quietly:

“Seven years in a coffin of stee-eel.”

Nelly fired two shots into the ceiling and Valera jerked to his feet and threw his hands up. Vadim merely pulled his head further down into his greatcoat.

“You lousy bastards,” said Lusya, gingerly taking hold of the smoking pistol offered to her, and two black rivulets streamed down her cheeks.

“Now you listen to me,” Nelly hissed at the two officers in black. “You, don’t move, and you,” she turned the barrel of her gun on Valera, “get behind the wheel. And if you so much as brake in the wrong place, I’ll plug hot lead into your bald patch, and you’d better believe I mean it...”

The law-enforcement slang had an instant effect on the sailors. Hardly a trace of Vadim’s forehead and cap showed above his shoulders, the rest had all retreated under his greatcoat, and Valera actually sat down on the chess board, knocking over the burning candles, and swung his leg rapidly into the cab. The motor rattled into life and the bus crept out on to the highway.

“Nelly,” Lusya said suddenly, “tell him to put on the Bad Boys Blue.”

Nelly didn’t say anything, but Valera had obviously heard, and the music began to play. Vadim swayed on his haunches. At first he sobbed a few times, then he began howling from deep in his belly and shaking all over. At one crossroads Valera turned and said to him:

“Stop that whining, you carrion... You’re a disgrace to the entire fleet...”

But Vadim carried on sobbing: it wasn’t as though he was crying over what had happened, more like he was mourning something else, as though he’d just remembered a stamp album he had lost in his childhood. Lusya felt how her woman’s heart was moved by him, and then her hand came across the bottle with the tube stuck into it, still lying on the seat.

“That’s the house,” said Nelly, pointing to a tall sixteen-storey building along the road ahead of them. “Drive to the

entrance, Baldy... Open the door."

The door hissed open.

"Are you handing us over to the Commandant's office?" Valera asked. "Or what?"

"Just get lost, you scum," said Nelly, "and if I ever... I've never worked for the pigs."

"That's what I meant," Valera reasoned calmly, "the best thing is a civil settlement. What about the pistols?"

Nelly thought for a moment.

"See that snow-drift?" She pointed to a heap of snow about five yards from the bus. We'll throw them down to you out of the window. We don't need any extras on our charge-sheet, do we Lusya?"

Lusya nodded in agreement. She was quite calm now; she felt like a heroic little machine-gunner.

"Stay in the bus for five minutes, you scum, got it?" Nelly said, when Lusya was already outside. As she got out, Nelly picked up the metal figurine from the floor and tucked it under her arm, and Lusya saw Valera clench his fists tight beside his distorted face as he gave out a quiet groan. Vadim just carried on sitting there with his hands over his head.

They walked backwards all the way to the entrance. The bus's engine was growling softly and through its windows they could see the two motionless black figures.

"Into the lift, quick," Nelly muttered. Lusya ran after her to the landing in front of the lifts, but then Nelly suddenly dashed back to her post-box, opened it, took out a fresh copy of *The Young Guard*, then ran back again. The lift arrived just at that moment, and when its doors closed behind them Lusya relaxed completely for the first time.

"What a day!" she thought, squinting at the small head protruding from behind Nelly's arm.

"Were you really scared?" Nelly asked.

"Just a bit," Lusya answered. "They're a pair of maniacs, they'd have done us in and dumped us in a snow-drift till spring. With pawns in our mouths. Hey, they're the ones who killed Natasha and Tanya... What'd we let them go for?"

"Just look here," said Nelly, opening her new magazine at

the last page and holding it up in front of Lusya's nose. "See the size of the print-run?"

"Well, so?"

"So. Every forest has its own dustmen. They keep the numbers in balance."

"That's very cynical of you," Lusya muttered.

"Life's a cynical business," answered Nelly.

The lift stopped at one of the upper floors, Lusya didn't notice precisely which. The door of the flat was the only one on the landing not covered in artificial leather, just plain wood. The lock clicked as it opened.

"Come in."

Nelly's flat was in an extreme state of disorder. The door into the single room was ajar and the light was on – Nelly must have left it on when she went out. There were clothes thrown about everywhere. Bottles of expensive perfume lay around on the floor like vodka bottles in the flat of an alcoholic. Standing on the carpet among the haphazard scattered magazines (mostly *Vogue*, but there were a couple of *Newsweeks*) there were several ashtrays bristling with butts. On the floor by the wall stood a small Japanese television, with a huge black twin-cassette deck beside it. By the window was a small bookshelf, with at least ten swollen copies of *The Young Guard* standing on it – even in her best times Lusya had never accumulated more than five, and for a moment she felt jealous. There was a sour scent in the air and Lusya immediately recognised it as the smell produced when spilled champagne is left to evaporate for a few days and turns into something like a blob of glue.

Pride of place in the room went to a double bed so huge that at first it could easily be overlooked altogether. On it lay a blue duvet and several flannel sheets in various colours, a gift from fraternal Vietnam.

"She brings them home as well," thought Lusya, looking carefully at the metal figurine, "so there can't be anything to be afraid of in that. I'm not the only one..."

"*Grossmeister* Karpov," she read from the small grey piece of paper glued to the cubic pedestal.

Nelly was left wearing a green woollen dress with a thin black belt which went very well with her black hair and green enamel ear-rings.

"Take your coat off," she said, "I'll be back in a moment."

Lusya took off her fur coat and hat and hung them on the deer antlers that served as a coat rack. She raked in two different slippers, slipped her feet into them and went into the bathroom, where the first thing she did was to wash away the black cosmetic rivulets on her cheeks. Then she joined Nelly in the kitchen, which was just as untidy and had the same sour smell of stale champagne. Nelly was gathering various bits of food into a plastic bag: two boxes of chocolate marshmallows, a stick of cervelat sausage, a loaf of bread and several cans of beer.

"For the sailors," she said to Lusya, "to cheer them up a bit. That one that was sobbing on the floor..."

"Vadim," said Lusya.

"That's right, Vadim. There was something really touching about him."

Lusya shrugged.

Nelly put both pistols in the plastic bag, then weighed the heavy figurine of the great chess player in her hand and finally set it on the fridge.

"It can be a souvenir," she said, opening the window.

Thick clouds of steam burst out of the kitchen just as they had from the bus half-an-hour before. Down below the bus looked like a green Christmas-tree ornament, and two long shadows swayed across the ground beside it. Nelly tossed out the bag, which shrank as it flew through the air and then thumped down on the snow-covered rectangle of the lawn. The two black figures immediately made a dash for it.

Nelly hastily closed the window and shuddered.

"I'd have thrown a brick at them," said Lusya.

"Never mind," said Nelly. "They'll find this harder to take. Want some tea?"

"A drink would be better," said Lusya.

"Then let's go back in there, and take this guy along with

us... I've got half a bottle of Johnny Walker."

Lusya remembered that Johnny Walker had reputedly been the favourite tipple of the deceased comrade Andropov. My God, she thought suddenly, how recent all that was — the snowstorm on Kalininsky Prospect, the struggle for discipline, the gentle face of the young American pioneer girl on the television screen, the slanting blue signature, "Androp" under the typed text of the reply... And what was his harsh soul now whispering to the tender young spirit of Samantha Smith, who outlived him by such a short margin? How fleeting is life, how frail is man...

Nelly was hastily clearing away the overflowing ashtrays, the tights hanging inside-out on the back of the armchair, the grapefruit skin and the biscuit crushed into the carpet, and soon the only things left on the floor were a pile of magazines and the iron grandmaster.

"There, that's a bit more civilised..."

Lusya sat down on the edge of the bed and took a gulp from her wide glass. After the vodka, she didn't even notice the taste, only a slight burning in her throat.

Nelly sat down beside her and fixed her gaze on the small figure in the centre of the carpet.

"You know," she said, "I read this fairy-tale in some book or other. Two armies are fighting a battle on a plain, with this huge mountain towering up above them. And up on the summit two wizards are playing chess. When one of them makes a move, one of the armies down below starts moving as well. If he takes a piece, soldiers die down on the plain, and if one wins, then the other's army is wiped out."

"I've seen something like that..." said Lusya. "That's right, it was in *Star Wars*, the third film, when Darth Vader's fighting that other one on his starship, and it's like the same things happen down on the planet. Are you talking about those two head-cases?"

"I was just thinking," Nelly went on, ignoring Lusya's question, "maybe it's all the other way round?"

"How d'you mean?"

"The other way round. When one of the armies advances

or retreats, one of the wizards has to make a move. And when the other wizard's soldiers are killed, he takes one of his pieces."

"I can't see any difference," said Lusya. "It just depends what side you look at it from."

Nelly reached out a hand holding the thin black slab of the remote control towards the television, and multicoloured ice-hockey players began flitting silently across the screen.

"So what are the armies?" Lusya asked. "Good and evil?"

"Progress and reaction," said Nelly, in a tone that made Lusya laugh. "I don't know. Let's watch this, shall we?"

The ice-hockey rink disappeared and a plump man in spectacles appeared, standing beside a large wall-mounted chess board.

"Events have taken an unexpected turn in the final stage of the match for the world chess championship," he said, louder and louder – Nelly kept clicking the button on the remote control. "When the game was adjourned black clearly had the advantage, but a paradoxical move by one of the white rooks has produced an intriguing situation..."

The figures on the board moved with loud thumping sounds from one square to another.

"One of the two officers, I beg your pardon, bishops, that formed the foundation of the black position came under attack, and the threat was actually produced by the challenger himself, who had failed during his time away from the board to analyse all the consequences of an apparently ill-considered move by a white knight."

The screen switched to a close-up of the commentator's fingers and the profile of a white knight.

"Black's white-square bishop has been forced to withdraw..." the figures thumped around the board again, "and the position of the black-square bishop is almost hopeless."

The commentator poked a finger at the white squares on the board and then at the black squares, twirled his hand in the air and smiled sadly.

"I hope we shall know how the game ends in time for the evening news bulletin."

The screen was filled with a large field, hemmed in on both sides by long fences running as far as the forest which bounded the field in the distance. At the bottom of the shot there was a stretch of a main road, with the figures of the weather forecast crawling slowly along it – most of them beginning with a heavy minus sign that looked like a brick.

"I could just take one of those bricks and smack Valera's bald head with it..." thought Lusya.

"D'you know what that music is?" Nelly asked, moving closer to Lusya.

"No," answered Lusya, moving away, and feeling her breasts beginning to ache again. "They used to play it all the time at the end of the news programme, but now they don't use it very often."

"It's a French song called 'Manchester-Liverpool!'"

"But those are English cities," said Lusya.

"So what? The song's French. You know – all my life, we've been travelling in this train, I don't remember Manchester and I'll probably never get to Liverpool."

Lusya felt Nelly move closer again, until she could feel the warmth of her body through the fine green wool. Then Nelly put her arm on her shoulder, another indefinite gesture that could have been taken for a simple expression of liking, but Lusya already knew what was coming next.

"Nelly, what are you..."

"Ah, France," Nelly sighed in a barely audible voice, and her arm slipped from Lusya's shoulder to her waist.

The news programme finished. Then the screen was occupied once again by the announcer, and then by some run-down workshop with a gloomy-looking crowd of workers in caps standing in the centre. A correspondent with a microphone popped up, and a table appeared with portly gentlemen in jackets sitting behind it. One of them looked Lusya straight in the eye, hid his indecently hairy hands under the table and began speaking.

"Paris..." Nelly whispered in Lusya's ear.

"We shouldn't do this," Lusya whispered, mechanically repeating the words of the talking head on the screen, "the

workers will not understand and they will not approve..."

"Then we shan't tell them," Nelly murmured in reply, and her movements became even more shameless. She breathed the bewitching fragrance of "Anais Anais", with perhaps a lingering, slightly bitter note of "Fiji".

"All right then," Lusya thought, with an unexpected sense of relief, "this will be my final examination."

Lusya lay on her back and looked up at the ceiling. Nelly was gazing thoughtfully at her profile, with its delicate covering of powder.

"You know something?" she said after a long silence.

"You're my first."

"And you're mine," Lusya replied.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Does it feel good with me?"

Lusya closed her eyes and nodded ever so gently.

"Listen," whispered Nelly, "will you promise me one thing?"

"Yes," Lusya whispered back.

"Promise me that you won't get up and leave, no matter what I tell you. Promise."

"Of course I promise. You don't have to ask."

"Did you notice anything unusual about me at all?"

"No. You know a lot of police slang, that's all. But if you work for them, what business is that of mine?"

"Apart from that. Nothing else?"

"No, nothing at all."

"Okay then... No, I can't. Kiss me... That's it. Do you know who I used to be?"

"God almighty, what difference does it make?"

"No, that's not what I meant. Have you never heard about transsexuals? About sex-change operations?"

Lusya was suddenly overwhelmed by a fear even worse than that she had felt in the bus, and her breasts began aching terribly again. She moved away from Nelly.

"Yes, what about them?"

"Okay, then just let me finish," Nelly whispered hurriedly, as if she were afraid she wouldn't be given enough time. "I used to be a bloke. My name was Vasily, Vasily Tsyruk, Secretary of the Regional Committee of the Young Communist League. I used to go around in a suit with a waistcoat and a tie, holding all sorts of meetings... Personal cases... All those agendas and minutes... And then, on the way home I'd pass this hard-currency restaurant, the fancy wheels, the babes like you, and all of them laughing, and there I was in that shitty suit, with my badge and my moustache, carrying my briefcase, and they're all laughing and going off in their cars, driving off somewhere to enjoy themselves... Never mind, I thought... I'll serve my time in the Party, then I'll be an instructor in the City Committee - I had everything going for me. And then, I thought, I'll live it up in restaurants much better than that, I'll go all round the world... And then, out of the blue, I went to this Palestinian friendship evening... and this drunken Arab, Avada Ali, threw his glass of tea in my face... And so the Regional Committee started asking me: Why are people throwing glasses of tea in your face, Tsyruk? Why do they throw them in your face and not in ours? I got an official reprimand entered in my file. I nearly went insane at the time, and then I saw in the *Literary Gazette* that this doctor, a Professor Vyshnevsky, did operations - for homos, you know, but don't think I was like that, too... I wasn't deviant. I just read that he injected various hormones and changed your psychological make-up, and I was having a real hard time living with my old psychological make-up. So, to cut it short, I sold my old 'Moskvich' and went into the clinic. I had six operations in a row, and they were injecting me with hormones all the time. Then a year ago I left the clinic, my hair had grown already, and everything had changed, I walked along the street and the snow-drifts looked like the cotton wool used to look under the Christmas tree... Then I seemed to get used to it. But just recently I've begun feeling as though everybody's watching me and they all know all about me. So then I met you and I thought I could check to make sure whether I really am a

woman or... Lusya, what's wrong?"

Lusya had drawn away, and now she was sitting by the wall, squeezing her knees against her breasts with her arms. For a while neither of them spoke.

"Do I disgust you?" Nelly whispered. "Do I?"

"So you used to have a moustache," said Lusya, pushing aside a lock of hair that had fallen over her face. "Maybe you remember you had an organisational deputy? Andron Pavlov? You used to call him the louse?"

"Yes, I remember," Nelly said, astonished.

"He used to go and fetch your beer, too. And then you opened a personal file on him because of the propaganda stand? That time they drew Lenin in gloves and Dzerzhinsky without a shadow?"

"How could you... Louse, is it you?"

"And it was you that made up that name for me – what for? Because I hung on every word you said, and sat up every evening till eleven signing minutes? My God, how different everything could have been... D'you know what I've been dreaming of for the last two years? Driving past your Regional Committee in a Mercedes 500 dressed up to the nines and seeing Tsyruk, I mean you, walking along with his little Tartar moustache and his briefcase full of minutes from meetings, just to look at you from my place on the back seat, to glance in your eyes and then look straight through you, at the wall... Not to notice you. D'you understand me?"

"But Andron, it wasn't me... In the Party Bureau Shertenevich said that the deputy for organisation had to bear responsibility... It was such a scandal, the oldest party member in the region went crazy, the old fart, when he saw your stand. He was just buying some *kefir*... No, Andron, honestly – is it really you?"

Lusya wiped her lips with a sheet.

"You got any vodka?"

"I've got some neat alcohol," said Nelly, getting up from the bed, "just a moment."

Covering herself with the crumpled sheet, she ran into the kitchen, and Lusya heard a rattle of plates. Something made

of glass fell on the floor and shattered. Lusya coughed and dribbled on the carpet, and then she wiped her lips hard again with the sheet.

A minute later Nelly came back with two cheap glasses half-full of liquid.

"Take that... Regional Committee glasses... I don't even know what to call you..."

"What you used to call me, Louse," said Lusya, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, forget it. You're just like some stupid woman... Here's to our meeting."

They drank.

"D'you ever see any of the old gang?" Nelly asked, after a pause.

"No. I hear rumours, though. Remember Vasya Prokudin from the international section?"

"Yes."

"He's been married to a Swedish guy for more than two years now."

"What? You mean he had the operation too?"

"No. In Sweden you can marry a giraffe if you want to."

"Ughu. I was just thinking. He had terrible pockmarks, and a squint."

"There's no way to understand these foreigners," Lusya said wearily. "They're so spoilt for choice, they just go crazy. Just recently I saw one guy in the metro, about forty years old, face like a brick, hardly any forehead at all, and he had a copy of *The Young Guard* in his bag. So there must be some demand even for that... Hey, listen, do you remember Astrakhan, the building brigade?"

Nelly looked at Lusya tenderly.

"Of course."

"Remember they kept playing the same song over and over again? About the trumpeter? And about dancing under the moon? They were playing it today in the Moskva."

"I remember. I've got it here. Shall I put it on?"

Lusya nodded, got off the bed, threw a sheet over her bare shoulders and went over to the small table. Behind her

the music began to play.

"Where did you get the operation done?" Nelly asked.

"In a co-operative," Lusya said, surveying the French tampon packets strewn across the table. "Seems they pulled a fast one. Instead of American silicone, they put in some rubbishy Soviet rubber. I used to work the Finns on the railway platform near Leningrad, and I thought I would shatter in the frost. And they hurt a lot of the time, too."

"That's not the rubber. Mine often hurt as well. They say it passes after a while."

Nelly sighed and fell silent.

"What are you thinking about?" Lusya asked after a minute or so.

"Oh, nothing... It's just that sometimes, you know, I still feel as though I'm following the Party Line. Throwing sausage out of the window to sailors. D'you understand? It's just that times have changed."

"Aren't you ever afraid they might change back again?" Lusya asked. "Honestly, now?"

"Not really," said Nelly. "If they do, we'll just have to cope. We've got plenty of experience to rely on, haven't we?"

The pale dawn of winter spread across the wide open field. A small green bus was driving along the deserted highway. Every now and then the bright-red name of a collective farm leapt forward to meet it on a sign by the road, and then a few ugly, crooked little houses would go hurtling by, followed by another sign with the same name, only this time with a thick red line running through it.

There were two naval officers in black inside the bus. One, who was driving, had a bandaged head, on which his cap was balanced with difficulty. The other one, sitting on the seat closest to the driver's cab, had bandages on his hands. His face was puffy from crying and smeared with chocolate. He was leafing through the pages of a thick white copy of *The Young Guard* and grimacing in pain as he read in a loud voice.

"A taste for discipline. Discipline and nobility. Discipline

and honour. Discipline as an expression of the creative will. The conscious love of discipline. Discipline is order. Order creates rhythm, and rhythm gives rise to freedom. Without discipline there is no freedom. Disorder is chaos. Chaos is decay. Disorder is slavery. The army is discipline. The important thing, as in the tempering of steel, is not to overheat the metal. To avoid this it is sometimes allowed to cool off..."

The bus swerved sharply, and the officer in the back dropped his magazine.

"What d'you think you're doing?" he asked his colleague. "You losing your grip?"

"How could we let them go..." his colleague groaned. "Now he'll lose. He'll lose to that... to that..."

"They let us go," the other sailor replied acidly, hunching over the magazine. "Well, shall I carry on reading?"

"Haven't you recovered yet?"

"No. I'm not even close to recovering."

"Then read about the greatcoat."

"Where's that bit?" the first sailor asked, fumbling with the dirt-stained pages.

"Have you forgotten already, you bitch?" said the second sailor with a twisted smile. "You've got a very short memory."

The first sailor said nothing, and just gave him a glazed and wounded look.

"Start from the word 'Lermontov'," said the second sailor.

"Lermontov," the first sailor began, "*once called the long-waisted Chechen coat the finest costume in the world for men. In terms of symbolic significance the Russian officer's coat may now without hesitation be ranked alongside the Chechen coat. Its form, silhouette and cut are perfect, and most important of all – a very rare occurrence in history – it became a national symbol following the battles of Borodino and Stalingrad. The artist can trace its silhouette in ancient frescoes. Even if all the designers in the world were set to work, they could not create a more perfect or more noble costume than the Russian greatcoat. As Colonel Taras Bulba would have said, 'Their mousy natures would not be up to the job...'*"

"It doesn't say 'colonel'," the second sailor interrupted.

"No," said the first sailor, running his eyes over the page, "that word's in a different place: '*A father's behest is a report on how you are living your life. Let us recall Colonel Taras Bulba. Manhood is primarily a moral category. In this...*'"

"That's enough," said the second sailor. His face seemed to light up from inside at those final words, and the black dots of his pupils shifted confidently from the highway to the moon where it hung, gradually growing paler, over the snowy wall of the forest.

The first sailor put down the magazine on the vinyl surface spattered with blobs of candle wax, pulled over a box of chocolate marshmallows and began to eat. Suddenly he started to sob.

"I always listen to what you say," he said, grimacing with the effort to control his face as he wept, "I always have, ever since we were children. I copy everything you do. But you went mad ages ago, Varvara. I can see that now... Just look at us – bald, wearing sailor's vests, drifting around in a sardine-can and always drinking, drinking... And this chess business..."

"But this is a battle," said the second sailor, "a battle, no quarter given. It's hard on me, too, Tamara."

The first officer covered his face with his hands, unable to speak for a few seconds. Gradually he grew calmer, took a marshmallow out of the box and shoved it whole into his mouth. "How proud I used to be of you! I even felt sorry for my girl-friends who didn't have any older sisters... And I followed you everywhere you went, everywhere, and I did everything you did... And you always act as though you know what we're living for and how we should live our lives... But now I've had enough. Scared to death before every check-up, and then the nights, with that awl... No, I'm quitting. I've had it."

"And what about our cause?" asked the second sailor.

"What about it? If you really want to know, I don't give a shit about chess."

The bus swerved again, and almost ran into a snow-drift

at the roadside. The second officer grabbed hold of a handrail with his bandaged hands and howled in pain.

"No more! I've had it!" shouted the first one. "From now on I'm thinking for myself. You can go back to your *Tambov*. D'you hear me? Stop the bus!"

Collapsing back into bitter sobbing, he took several IDs of different colours out of his pocket and threw them down on to the vinyl. The pistol followed them.

"Stop, you pig!" he shouted. "Stop, or I'll jump while we're moving!"

The bus braked and the front door opened. The officer leapt out on to the road with a wail, clutched to his chest the bag with the cervelat sausage and ran off diagonally across the immense square of virgin snow enclosed by the highway, the forest and the fences, running towards the forest and the moon, which was already completely white. His movements were awkward, almost elephantine, but he moved quite quickly.

The second sailor silently watched the black figure gradually become a smaller and smaller mark on the smooth white field. Sometimes the figure stumbled and fell, then it got up and ran on. Eventually it disappeared completely, and a small, bright tear rolled down the cheek of the sailor sitting at the steering-wheel.

The bus started moving. The officer's face gradually recovered its calm expression. The teardrop trembling on his chin dropped on to his uniform jacket and the track it had left on his face dried out.

"Seven years in a coffin of steel," he sang quietly in greeting to the new day and the open road, as wide as life itself.